

Bob Dylan's Myth Busting Cutting Edge by Peter Stone Brown

In the middle of January 1965, Bob Dylan went into Columbia Records Studios in New York to begin work on his fifth album, an album that would be very different from his previous four. He had a few musician friends from the New York folk scene, guitarist Bruce Langhorne, John Sebastian who was starting to a lot of studio work playing harmonica, and blues singer John Hammond. One of the things these three musicians had in common was all of them were experimenting with playing electric instruments. Hammond was about to release his third album, *So Many Roads*, his second with a band, a band that included a guitarist named Jaime R. Robertson, a drummer, Mark Levon Helm, an organist, Eric Hudson and a piano player, Michael Bloomfield. Bruce Langhorne, a well-known side man who played and recorded with several artists including The Clancy Brothers & Tommy Makem and Odetta, had started using a De Armond pickup in his Martin guitar. Six months after these sessions John Sebastian, also a singer, songwriter and guitarist would have a top ten hit, "Do You Believe In Magic" with his band The Lovin' Spoonful. Also at the session were some of the top studio players in New York. This was the beginning of one of Bob Dylan's most creative periods, recording three albums in 14 months that would change American popular music and redefine songwriting.

The Cutting Edge (Columbia Legacy), the 12th volume of Dylan's bootleg series is available in three very different editions, a two-disc Best Of, a six-disc Deluxe, and an 18-disc limited Collector's Edition available exclusively on bobdylan.com that includes every studio track Dylan recorded in 1965 and 1966 with the last disc featuring several songs recorded in hotel rooms in England in 1965 and '66 as well as songs recorded during an interview with music journalist Robert Shelton. There is as with the last several Bootleg Series a picture book, and another book that includes liner notes, reminisces by musicians and track listing and musician credits. While a lot of the stuff on the 18th disc has been bootlegged, of particular interest are songs played by Dylan and Robbie Robertson which were featured in Dylan's rarely seen film, *Eat The Document* which show where Dylan's music might have gone had he not had the motorcycle crash a few months later. While there are several additional goodies in the Collector's Edition, including all the 45 rpm singles recorded in '65 and '66, the price has quite a few Dylan fans not exactly happy. The Deluxe and Collector's Editions are programmed in the order the songs were recorded, though the Deluxe version has a couple of exceptions to accommodate placing every take of "Like A Rolling Stone" on one disc.

Which version to get depends on your economic situation and your level of interest. If you don't like hearing several versions of the same song in a row, get the two-disc *Best of*. Most of it was featured on the recent NPR

“First Listen” and it allows you to appreciate each take. This review however is about the deluxe six CD edition. The liner notes make it very clear that these are not perfect or finished recordings, and what you might hear at the end of the day in the studio during playback, though the recordings are not rough mixes.

One of the important things, perhaps *the* important thing about *The Bootleg Series* and especially the volumes devoted to studio recordings is they provide a key to Dylan’s creative process both lyrically and musically. On *The Cutting Edge*, this process is revealed like never before. Dylan likes to record fast in the studio and compared to other musicians, he does record fast. *Bringing It All Back Home* was completed in three days, *Highway 61* in six and the Nashville sessions for *Blonde On Blonde* in eight. When Dylan comes into the studio with a completed song, things usually happen fast, the song is done in a couple of takes. However, on these three albums he arrived in the studio with several songs that weren’t finished. At times it seems as if the ideas were coming so fast, he’d start on a new song before finishing the one before, just to make sure he had the idea down. Some had placeholder lyrics, incomplete choruses and on others while he usually had the melody or something close, he wasn’t necessarily sure where he wanted it to go musically. Dylan’s whole thing when working with other musicians was getting great players who would know what to do instinctively leaving the songs open to improvisation and most of all spontaneity. Dylan was not afraid to be adventurous.

Among the many surprises of these recordings are songs done in completely different arrangements and time signatures, such as “Just Like A Woman” done to a Bo Diddley beat or a completely crazed “Leopard Skin Pillbox Hat” that is anything but a blues that happened because Al Kooper discovered various sound effects on the keyboard he was using and started having fun. Sometime arrangements go full circle or close to it. Take One of “It Takes A Lot To Laugh” finds Dylan playing piano with a rhythm that isn’t too far from the released version, but the song becomes a wild rocker before returning to something close to the feel of the first take with Dylan on guitar instead of piano.

Another song where you can really trace the development of both arrangement and lyrics is “Memphis Blues Again.” The first take is slower, not quite the same melody and the first time around Dylan sings “Nashville Blues” again. It takes several tries at various tempos with changes in arrangements before both Dylan and the Nashville musicians find what they’re looking for. On the way there, Dylan is searching for the right way to phrase the words he’s written, sometimes due to the temp and other times simply because he doesn’t have the song down yet. The Deluxe edition takes you up to the version before the final one. The band now knows what they want to do, and Dylan’s phrasing and delivery is almost there. Now

from the minute I first heard this song back in 1966, I always considered it to be incredibly funny, primarily because of Dylan's phrasing, whether it's the way he sings "The Senator came down here" or "Your debutante just knows what you need/But I know what you want." However there are times in the early takes where I found myself wondering if he originally didn't intend the song to be funny.

The songs on *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde On Blonde* are when Dylan moved strongly into symbolism often combined with a wonderful sense of the absurd. These are the songs that solidified Dylan's reputation and also the songs that caused everything Dylan wrote, did, said, wore, muttered, ate, and sneezed to be analyzed to death for the 50 years following their release. With the lyrical revelations on this album, I don't see that stopping. You may find yourself thinking well maybe I didn't really know what that song was about when you hear early lyrics that put a whole new spin on a song's possible meaning or you realize that the choruses of "Tombstone Blues," "Memphis Blues Again" or "Just Like A Woman" weren't necessarily set in stone. At the same time, while Dylan has never considered his lyrics as sacrosanct as his fans, he clearly is always searching for the right word, the right line, the one that will pierce through the hardest. And if that line or word or phrase occurs to him in the middle of recording a song or onstage or anywhere else, it makes it no less valid.

The other incredible thing about this period of Dylan is how different the sound is on each album. *Bringing It All Back Home* had only been out for a few months when the sessions for *Highway 61* started, and following *Highway 61*, even though he was on the road constantly, sessions started a little more than a month after its release. Some of the change in sound is because Dylan changed producers after recording "Like A Rolling Stone" from Tom Wilson to Bob Johnston, but it's also because there were different musicians on each album. Of the two, Wilson was more hands-on, though not overly so, while Johnston was about creating an environment for things to happen and then letting whatever happened happen.

Bringing It All Back Home was the album to (hopefully) ease Dylan out of the role of solo folksinger. Much of the sound of the album after a bit of experimentation is due to the guitar work of Bruce Langhorne, the only musician on the record to appear on both the electric side and the acoustic side. As noted above, Langhorne played an acoustic guitar with a pickup, but he had this cool yet gentle electric sound, a sound he would also use backing Joan Baez, Richard and Mimi Farina and Tom Rush among others. Langhorne pretty much set the standard for how to back up a solo singer playing an acoustic guitar with an electric guitar, an art in itself. He knew how to do it without overplaying, and without being intrusive. Check out

how he develops his part on both “She Belongs To Me” and “Love Minus Zero/No Limit.”

One of the more revealing things about this set is the attention paid to songs a lot of people consider minor tracks, “Outlaw Blues” and “On The Road Again.” Take two of “Outlaw Blues” starts out with Dylan playing incredibly raunchy electric guitar backed by John Sebastian on harp and it takes a couple of verses for the other musicians to fall in. “On the Road Again” goes through a few rhythmic changes before arriving at the simpler version on the album.

Of the songs left off *Bringing It All Back Home*, why “If You Gotta Go” was left off is a mystery, though it’s possible some higher up found the lyrics too suggestive. Manfred Mann’s cover was briefly banned in England. There are two versions included, one solo acoustic and one with a band featuring Frank Owens on piano and a woman backup singer. For years Dylan fans have been trying to find out who the singer was, and it was recently discovered that the singer was Angeline Butler, a member of a group called The Pilgrims who also recorded for Columbia. Just as interesting is the fact that Angeline Butler was an organizer for SNCC (The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and was one of the organizers representing SNCC at the 1963 March On Washington.

If *Bringing It All Back Home* was a step in the water, *Highway 61 Revisited* was Dylan’s full-blown move into rocking out with a heavier band.

Disc Three is devoted solely to the song “Like A Rolling Stone,” presenting all 15 takes. The first takes have Dylan on piano playing the song in waltz time, and pianist Frank Owens stops the proceedings to break down the arrangement so the other musicians can learn it. The next day Dylan switches to guitar, the time signature is changed to 4/4, and Al Kooper sneaks in on organ and they nail it on the 4th take. For whatever reason, Dylan keeps recording several more takes apparently not realizing he had it down. It was rare for Dylan to keep recording once he had the take down, but at the same time he realized the importance of this song. The in studio chatter is included and it’s one of the few times Dylan shows real irritation. Also included are the four stems that make up the song since this was a four track recording, Dylan’s voice and guitar, Mike Bloomfield’s guitar with drums leaking in, Paul Griffin’s piano and Joe Macho’s bass and Al Kooper’s organ and Bobby Gregg’s drums. Of these stems, the most interesting is clearly Bloomfield’s guitar part and it should be noted this is a more isolated version than the one that appeared on last year’s box set devoted to Bloomfield. The notes say the producers included the stems to show how the sum is greater than its parts and in this case they are right.

The sound of *Highway 61* would be dominated by two musicians, guitarist Mike Bloomfield and Al Kooper a friend of Tom Wilson's who was hoping to play guitar, but gave up that notion the second he saw Bloomfield play. He snuck into the studio during "Like A Rolling Stone" came up with an organ part that helped make the song a hit and became an in demand keyboard player, an instrument he quickly had to learn. In taking over from Wilson, producer Bob Johnston retained the sound of "Like A Rolling Stone" for the rest of the album. Bloomfield's incredible playing dominates and more than once Dylan expresses his excitement over what he's hearing, even working him into the last verse of a previously unheard take of "Sitting On A Barbed Wire Fence." What we have is several takes of truly legendary songs, and while quite a few takes of "It Takes A Lot To Laugh" (aka "Phantom Engineer") have surfaced over the years, there are additional ones, and for the first time additional takes of "Ballad of A Thin Man," "Queen Jane Approximately," "Desolation Row" including one on piano and one with a full band as well as additional takes of "Positively Fourth Street" and "Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window?"

In early October while "Like A Rolling Stone" was fading and "Positively 4th Street" was still a hit, Dylan went into the studio again this time with his new road band, Levon and the Hawks (who three years later would emerge as The Band). They would record an early version of "Temporary Like Achilles," titled "Medicine Sunday," a 40 second joke, "Jet Pilot," a nod to the Beatles, "I Wanna Be Your Lover," and untitled instrumental. At the end of November they returned to the studio again with Bobby Gregg replacing Levon who had quit the tour. They recorded a new version of "Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window" that was quickly released as a single that ultimately did not do well, and several takes of a new song "Visions of Johanna" though at the time its title was "Seems Like A Freezeout." Four versions and a rehearsal are included. Some of these versions have circulated over the years and one was previously released on Bootleg Series #7. The first couple of takes are insanely fast and then they slow it down, but they fail to come up with the feel Dylan is looking for. The Hawks were a bar band put together by rockabilly singer Ronnie Hawkins. They were steeped in R&B and Chicago blues and were something of a legend in Toronto where Robbie Robertson was the boy guitar hero to a lot of local musicians. Onstage with Dylan they were an explosion every night, but they hadn't yet mastered the subtlety needed for this song. In January, Dylan would enter the studio with the Hawks again this time with another former member of Ronnie Hawkin's Hawks, Sandy Konikoff on drums and attempt another new song, "She's Your Lover Now." The song which ambitiously is Dylan talking to an ex and her boyfriend, alternating between them in each verse, has some of the most devastating lines Dylan ever wrote ("You just sit around and ask for ashtrays, can't you reach?"), and one legendary take comes close to completion, but fizzles out and Dylan eventually records the song in a much slower version alone on piano. This set has a previously

unheard take that sound and tempo wise is halfway between “Like A Rolling Stone” and “One Of Us Must Know (Sooner or Later)” a song Dylan would record a few days later. The inclusion of the new versions makes the connection between the songs much more clear and left me with the feeling Dylan dropped it in favor of the newer song.

When Dylan returned to the studio a few days later the only Hawks present were Robbie Robertson and Rick Danko, joined by Al Kooper on organ, Paul Griffin on Piano and Bobby Gregg on drums. The main order of business is recording “One Of Us Must Know.” Dylan doesn’t have the complete words yet or the chorus. By take 24 he does and the song is released as a single, his first of 1966 and the only song on *Blonde On Blonde* to be recorded in New York, but it doesn’t catch on. However it remains one of Dylan’s greatest songs and Paul Griffin’s incredible piano part is one of the greatest contributions to any Dylan record. Dylan would make a couple of more attempts to record the next few days, but the session on January 27th would be his last in New York City for four years.

Bob Johnston had been urging Dylan to record in Nashville, an idea Dylan’s manager Albert Grossman wasn’t thrilled with. Johnston had a crew of young session musicians who soon would be among the top session musicians. One, Charlie McCoy had played the acoustic guitar part on “Desolation Row.” While some people seem to think that because *Blonde On Blonde* was recorded in Nashville, it’s a country record, there is not one close to country song on the album. If anything, the song structure quite often is closer to what was going on down the road in Memphis. The Nashville musicians had to adjust to Dylan’s working habits, and to make sure he retained something of the hit sound he’d developed he brought with him Al Kooper and Robbie Robertson. For one Kenny Buttrey was the perfect drummer for Dylan’s music, and Dylan was finally able to come up with *the* version of “Visions Of Johanna.” Considering the song is heavy with obvious New York City imagery, it’s kind of funny Dylan had to go to Nashville to get the musical ambiance to complement the lyrics. With the exception of one version of “Memphis Blues Again” that appeared on *Bootleg Series Volume 7*, this is the first time outtakes from the Nashville sessions for *Blonde On Blonde* have appeared. They’ve never been bootlegged. And again when a song is complete or close to complete like “Absolutely Sweet Marie” or “Most Likely You Go Your Way or I’ll Go Mine,” it’s captured reasonably quickly. On the songs that aren’t complete, it takes a bit more time and the phases a song can go through is among the things that make this set interesting and important. And while the musicians had to wait hours for Dylan to finish the song, they pretty much nail “Sad Eyed Lady Of The Lowlands” on the first take, though it turns out that take four was the one on the album.

What *The Cutting Edge* ultimately does is give the listener a real look at how these three legendary albums were created. Not all of the takes are great, some aren't even close. Sometimes it's not the easiest listen, and I don't recommend trying to play all six discs in one day. But when Dylan and the musicians he's working with hit it, they really hit it, even if the take eventually fizzles out. So while this set clearly dispels the notion of Dylan as a one or two take artist and also shows that a lot of songs didn't not magically appear fully formed in his brain, the listener gets a unique glimpse at the work it took to make them come together.

And one other thing, while this isn't necessarily always the case with Bob Dylan records, on these three albums, the takes that ended up on those albums were the best takes which is why they were on the albums.

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